

There's Something about Mary
Rev. Kathleen Ellis
16 December 07

Theologically, Easter and its interpretation form the central event in Christianity, but it is Christmas, the birth story, that captures our imagination. We know the story of ordinary human babies, born in lowly circumstances, who grew to make an extraordinary contribution to human progress. The story of the birth of Jesus reminds us of everything we have encountered regarding the miracle of birth and the tenderness associated with mothers of infants.

Many of you have shared my experience of nursing an infant, or watching in awe. Mammals latch on to the breast with a strong suction and sometimes use their hands or paws to press out the last drop. An infant's cry will cause an immediate release of milk in its mother. It is one of my most precious memories: my son, and 4 years later his brother, looking into my eyes as he drinks his fill.

Christmas is celebrated as a season of sentiment, of candlelight, of evening and midnight services. We claim it as a harbinger of peace, for who among us does not want peace to accompany the birth of every infant? We long for peace in togetherness—we who struggle to live in peace set aside our differences to the best of our ability, prepare a feast to share, and exchange gifts and tokens of reconciliation.

Still, the rational mind balks at the mythology surrounding the Christmas story: angels singing to the shepherds; a star leading the astrologers to Bethlehem; a miraculous pregnancy visited upon a virgin. Because of the extraordinary life Jesus led in the years of his teaching and preaching, legends about his birth helped explain his special nature.

The Bible features several miraculous births, such as Ishmael, Isaac, Samson, and Samuel. The stories follow a pattern in which an angel appears, the recipient expresses fear or doubt, the divine message is given, and a sign is offered to overcome the objection. So if Jesus became Christ with his exultation into heaven, surely he, too, must have had a miraculous birth.

The prophet Micah (Micah 5:2-5) predicted the birth of a shepherd king who would be ruler of Israel. He would be born, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, like King David. Bethlehem at the time was home for an insignificant clan of Judah, but became exalted to this day as we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

The earliest birth narratives about Jesus are found in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. Their stories do have a number of common threads, such as the names of Mary and Joseph, and that young Jesus grew up in Nazareth and later began his ministry in that area of Galilee.

But they differ in significant ways as well. By the time these gospels were written toward the end of the first century, there would have been many stories passed around in

the oral tradition. Any writer, myself included, will pick and choose among available sources, and will also miss some that perhaps should have been obvious.

Most of us grew up hearing the story from Luke, in which Mary and Joseph are required to travel to Bethlehem for a census. Luke tells us about the stable, a chorus of angels, and shepherds “abiding in the field.” His story is filled with poetry that continues as songs today—those old high church standards, “Benedictus,” the “Nunc Dimittis,” the “Magnificat,” and a portion of the “Gloria in Excelsis.” Scholars today believe these songs were later additions, not part of Luke’s original narrative.

Matthew’s gospel doesn’t have any of this. There is no census. Instead, Mary and Joseph already live in Bethlehem, where a star shone right above Mary’s home. Matthew alone tells the story of a wicked King Herod who orders the slaughter of newborn baby boys in Bethlehem. Herod has sent his wise men—the astrologers—to find the child and let him know where he is, so that he can pay his respects. The wise men follow the star, bring gifts and homage to the child, and go back to their own country by another road, because they have been warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

But neither story mentions that the Greek word for virgin distorts the Jewish term of “young maiden.” Jewish law at the time held that once the young woman was engaged to be married, she was committed to the man. Pregnancy would not have been a cause for scandal; in fact, it would be seen as a good sign that she was fertile and the male line would be extended. Judaism encourages marriage; Jewish law expects that couples will “be fruitful and multiply.” Virginity, then, was no virtue.

Knowing this, John Shelby Spong wonders why such an elaborate story should become part of the mythology. He speculates that perhaps Joseph was not the father, but that Mary had been violated in some way.ⁱ My sense is that for Jesus to be “fully human,” he would have to have two human parents. To be “fully divine” one simply has to be born of the amazing gift of sexuality, meaning that we are all blessed in spiritual terms.

But back to traditional Roman Catholic doctrine: In 1854 Pope Pius X issued the Doctrine of Immaculate Conception, i.e., no original sin for Mary! In 1950 Pope Pius XII added the Doctrine of the Assumption in which the humanity of Mary was finally and absolutely removed: She was a virgin bride, a virgin mother, a perpetual virgin, a postpartum virgin, immaculately conceived at birth, and bodily assumed at the moment of death.ⁱⁱ She was no longer a real woman, yet she is held up as ideal. Who among us can live up to that?

Too often we are designated by our sexuality: virgin, slut, mother, old maid, wife. Men can be studs, jocks, effeminate, macho. The woman is sometimes given in marriage by her father to her husband. She is property.

We have struggled to overcome this standard. In wedding ceremonies today, when pressed, I will say, “Who presents this woman to be married to this man?” The new

answer is, “We do,” from both of her parents. However, the symbolism is still there and is thoroughly entrenched in our thinking.

Women who entered the workforce in large numbers during and after World War II, depended on male bosses to hire them and supervise them. Inequality was inherent in the system in which a woman’s job depended on her willingness to do his bidding. Once women were outside the protective environment of the home, they were seen as sexual beings, who might as well serve the wants and needs of men. I would go out on a limb and say that most, if not all, women have endured sexual harassment or worse.

So Mary’s status as a virgin has had significant impact on the view of women today. Feminists used to dismiss her as a product of a patriarchal culture, but now some of them celebrate her as a strong person who said “Yes” to God when the angel Gabriel announced her coming pregnancy (like in our parable this morning).

Eve had said “No” in the Garden of Eden. She was a virgin, too, until she tasted of the fruit of knowledge and opened her eyes to good and evil. Eve was designated sexual and bad and rebellious; but now Mary’s “Yes” would be the world’s salvation.ⁱⁱⁱ Women today have to relearn to celebrate all aspects of themselves, including a multitude of choices.

In the early church, Mary was seen as a pale version of womanhood—sexless, not very important, and even overlooked by Jesus when he pointed to others around him and said, “These are my brothers, sisters, mother.” The more prominent Mary of Magdala was even denigrated as a prostitute.

By the second century, Mary the mother of Jesus gained in stature as loyal and pure. Mary at her best made it possible for Jesus to take on human form. She gives us an opening to the divine feminine that in many world religions is an intrinsic element in the worship of a Deity.

Mary’s portrayal as meek and mild has transformed her into a woman of compassion, a champion of the poor and needy. She has appeared as the Virgin of the Golden Heart, the Immaculate Heart, the Virgin of the Poor. Churches have been built in her honor: Chartres, Notre Dame, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Hope. Hundreds of apparitions have been duly noted and investigated—visions of the blessed mother who stands for all that any of us have ever wanted or needed in a mother.

There were high hopes 10 years ago for the most devoted students of Mary, known as Mariologists. Millions of them around the world sent appeals and petitions to Pope John Paul to issue a new papal declaration for Roman Catholics, “that the Virgin Mary is “Co-Redemtrix, Mediatrix of All Graces and Advocate for the People of God.”^{iv}

John Paul was regarded as a devotee of Mary himself. He appointed a commission of 23 Mariologists to study the proposal, but they voted unanimously not to recommend such a

dogma.^v Under Pope Benedict, such an idea is even less likely. Still, the effort of millions underscores their extraordinary enthusiasm for the Mother of God.

Jon and I saw this devotion first-hand in Belém, Brasil, the Cidade da Fé! (City of Faith) The occasion was an annual celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary called Círio. There were Círio posters and tee shirts everywhere, and a buzz of activity to clean and prepare for the huge festival. When the weekend finally arrived, there was a candlelight procession Friday night of hundreds of thousands of devotees in the streets.

On Saturday morning an effigy of the Virgin of Nazaré is brought across the water (from Vila de Icoaraci) to the port of Belém, accompanied by hundreds of boats. Our group got up very early and boarded one of those boats going out into the Amazon.

There was a liturgy honoring Mary that lasted about an hour. It was a charismatic Catholic service, with a lot of praise songs accompanied by waving arms. At the end most people stood again for the Our Father, followed by the passing of the peace.

Almost immediately there was a frenzy of hungry passengers eager for coffee and breakfast. The coffee was sweet (undrinkable for me) and the food was either bread with ham, cheese, sausage, or a sweet filling. Besides coffee, there was coke and a popular soft drink called guaraná.

The boat ride itself lasted for 5 hours, among boats of every kind—small and large barges, 3-tiered boats like ours, jet skis, yachts, rowboats and tugboats. Many of them were decorated with colorful balloons and streamers. We circled around the other boats for a long time, admiring each other, then headed back toward the city, following the effigy of the Blessed Virgin Mary who was proudly carried ... on a Navy destroyer.

One big surprise came about when Jon Montgomery's name was called several times. He didn't hear it at first, but finally he got the message to come up to receive his prize—a statuette of Mary. Jon thought about giving it to the next family who hosted us, but with my encouragement he carried it all through the rest of the trip, up the Amazon, through burned-out jungles, and back to the airport.

Before going through security, he opened up the heavy package and made sure it didn't contain contraband. Jon did not relish the thought of Homeland Security jailing him for being a mule, using the BVM, as he and my sister called her.

Later that day was a time for families and friends to get together, almost like our American Thanksgiving. This entire trip was made possible because my sister's husband Dick Korn is a former priest who spent 15 years working in the region of the Amazon. We were so fortunate to have an insider's tour of the area—the trip of a lifetime. One benefit is that some of his former church members invited us to their home.

For Círio, one family served a multitude of traditional foods, featuring duck in manioc sauce. The sauce is said to be good for healing, though I don't know what it's supposed

to heal. We had seen some greens being threshed the day before; the same type of greens were cooked and served over rice. For dessert, we had gravioli (sp?) that tasted like a smooth blend of yogurt, cottage cheese, and fruit. Before we left, the hostess gave me this necklace that had been made by kids with Down's syndrome.

On Sunday morning, the procession swelled to thousands, who follow the effigy of the Virgin around the city, carried on a litter covered in hundreds of flowers for five hours until eventually it arrived at the Basilica de Nazaré.

Behind the Saint followed floats, clergy, and miles of parishioners. People carried body parts made of candle wax in hope of healing. (In our small group we needed a knee, a lung, and maybe a brain for my brother-in-law Pete Korn, who had a stroke a few years ago.)

The most fortunate people are the ones who manage to carry the platform on its way from the Cathedral across town to the Basilica. They walk barefoot and hold onto a long rope that represents the unbreakable link between Mary and her people.^{vi}

Our group of seven ventured out on foot to a place where we could see the procession going around a bend in the road—we were near Avenida Nazaré (Nazareth Avenue). Dick said it was a combination of faith, folklore, festival, and perhaps foolishness. Vendors hawked their wares, from pinwheels, t-shirts, and toys to bottled water. The crowd kept growing. After more than two hours, the image of Mary was still about ½ block away, and it would take another hour or more for her to reach the intersection. As she came closer, more and more people pressed together. It was already crushing enough and my bladder was too full to stand much more of a crush. (Plus, it was hot!) It wasn't completely easy to sidle out of the crowd, but finally I made it out and found my way back to the hotel, and watched the scene on TV in the lobby along with several of the hotel employees.

A week later we found ourselves back in Belém on our way out of the country. That Saturday we walked passed the Basilica and ran into a Círio Festival and Fair (Feiro do Círio) for children. There were great photo ops and energy; large floats that were pulled by men and filled with children wearing wings or troops of Boy Scouts; a carnival; a market for souvenirs such as boats made of balsa wood and little cars made of plastic bottles—everything is reused or recycled here. We were startled to hear fireworks from the top of the Basilica and cannons out front. All over Brazil we saw images of Mary surrounded by flowers and dressed in robes of gold or blue, just as we see them in Catholic churches nearly everywhere.

So how do I bring this back home and into my everyday life? What does Mary have to do with me? In the mid-80s, I sang in the choir at our national Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. One of the songs was related to God and His power, but in the interest of gender equality, we changed the pronouns to God and Her power. I can barely describe the feeling I had as a woman: fully human yet fully divine. Creative power is neither male nor female. It needs us both.

The virgin clearly will have to go. But the feminine side of God will inevitably rise to take her place. We see her among the Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Pagans, Shamanists, Aborigines, Native Americans, Sufis, Wiccans, Jews, Christians, and more. Let her power join the divine masculine to transform the world.

Amen and Blessed Be

ⁱ John Shelby Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 128.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenneth L. Woodward, "Hail, Mary," (*Newsweek*, August 25, 1997) p. 51.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 49.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} http://www.istc.org/sisp/index.htm?fx=event&event_id=5781